

## How free are we?

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Inevitably, on the eve of every August 15, the thought of freedom comes to mind. And one wonders how precarious that freedom is.

We boast of independence from the foreign yoke, freedom from colonialism, democracy, free elections. Yet each one of those freedoms has its own obverse, each one has bread situations in which we are not free. We may be free of the foreign rulers, but are our rulers any better just because they are Indians? Is it really true that oppression and exploitation by our own people makes our condition more bearable? We have political leaders who ought to be in jail for subverting the constitution as well as the Indian Penal Code. We laugh when one of these leaders says that a jail term is a necessary qualification for political leaders. We laugh when the same leader declares that the flood waters will at last provide the poor of his state with the opportunity to eat fish, something they had been deprived of because of their poverty. We have the freedom to laugh, so we should be thankful and laugh more loudly at such serious aberrations. Parliament is held to ransom on the slightest pretext, instead of debating the issue concern on the slightest pretext, instead of people. Coalitions are created with the only object of keeping out one group, declaring that group as hostile to democracy and the Indian political system, forgetting that a large proportion of Indian voters also supported that group. You may be at loggerheads in the states but you have to support one another at the Centre, or else those monsters will take over. There is a disinformation drive to paint some groups black, but a blind eye to the peccadilloes of others even if they are equally suspect or harmful.

Communalism is not just about religious minorities, and that too only some of them; communalism includes casteism and racialism. And casteism is not just oppression of dalits, but seeking votes and running a government along caste affiliations and considerations- whatever that caste might be. The same goes for communalism. Today, India is not a cohesive society; it is divided into innumerable groups and sub-groups, and those group loyalties come first before indianness, much as we sing praises to “unity in diversity”.

Where is freedom when we as ordinary citizens have to bribe our way to get legitimate work out of the administration? It does not come as news to read that the families of the farmers to get the post-mortem done and then get the bodies released. Everyone knows that post-mortems are not charged, but even in Delhi, the capital of the country, the mortuary attendant the at ‘prestigious’ hospitals demands ‘something’ before releasing the bodies of relates, even close ones. Are we to consider this as the freedom to descend to the lowest levels of

callousness or as the birthright to make some money to immoral to earn that little extra on the side, till the pinch comes home' then of course, it is wrong. How much does one have to earn before it ceases to be 'Little' and prohibits one from asking for that extra, or a cut? "Little'. After all, is relative.

Are we free to walk on the streets of a town, late in the evening, enjoying the cool breeze without the noise from the traffic, holding a mental conversation, coming to terms with our own thoughts? You may be a victim of a hold up, and get killed or raped in the process. So why not report to the abusing the power vested in them. They act according to their own concept of freedom. The problem of abuse of power comes to the fore in Kashmir and in the North-East where, often enough, authorities are accused of killing the innocent. Laws to deal with insurgency are necessary; terrorists who threaten the freedom of others have to be dealt with, but not by casting one and all in that mould, and by ignoring the rules and regulations governing procedures under law.

And yet most of us would not like to abandon this country, we cherish this freedom in our hearts, and hope for a better dawn ahead, even if far ahead. We have to take a positive stand and take firm action, in small ways perhaps; to limit the damage done, stand up for our legitimate rights and ensure that we remain free in the true sense, not just to go and cast a vote at election time.